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Transitions with/in: Of doing insider research in the blockchain/energy community

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Bibliographical note: This research note is part of a forthcoming cover essay of my PhD thesis on information and energy systems in a power perspective - please cite chapter 3 of the cover essay¹.

Some research problems in STS don't present themselves readily; they are high mountains to climb. Anecdotal evidence might be abundant, suggesting that *something interesting* is going on inside a certain field, for example, inside board rooms, expert councils and hacker chatrooms. However, no validated "primary source" exists, not to mention aggregated data to answer pressing research questions in these fields exhibiting high entry barriers. This leaves these areas of research as an obvious choice for qualitative, ethnographic approaches. However, ethnographers rarely undertake collaborative projects with the "ideological Other", like investment bankers, law firms, or the military", leading to a bias that is hard to justify (Niewöhner 2016). Science and technology scholars and other social science researchers are then faced with two solutions: Either, climb another mountain². Or, look deeply in the methodological toolbox to find suitable equipment. One of the methodologies from the bottom of that toolbox is insider research, wrought with all kinds of dilemmas, choices and anxieties around credibility, validity and ethics. If we take out this tool – and I have done so – we need to handle it with care. One way of doing that, when done, is to be explicit about how we got to our findings, that is, to describe the way up the mountain. This is what methodology does (Greiffenhagen 2015, 2016). Derived from the Greek *met-hodos-graphia*, it describes (*graphia*) the pursuit of (*met*) the (knowledge) path (*hodos*). This research note is about insider research methods, that is, "doing data" (Lippert & Douglas Jones 2019) as an insider. The object of study is blockchain technology in the energy sector (Hasberg 2020, Andoni 2018).

The meaning of "with/in"³ is twofold: I use it to signify the transition *inside* communities of practice (Lave 1991) and the transition *within* me as a researcher taking place during co-laboration *with* and *in* the field. Co-laboration is a "third way" of field collaboration (Niewöhner 2017), denoting "temporary joint epistemic work (...) without telos" (Niewöhner 2016), but of an experimental and reflexive character. By applying Niewöhner's concept to insider research (Alvesson 2003, Riemer 1977, Brannick and Coghlan 2007), I call it co-laboration "from the other side".

This research note contains ideas for the methods chapter of my PhD cover essay. I share my story of research as one (non-prescriptive) example of doing phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg 2001)/institutional ethnography (Smith 2007). By following

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¹ See <https://vbn.aau.dk/en/persons/135747/projects/>

² what Niewöhner calls „Sympathie-Sampling“ in German (Niewöhner 2017)

³ I thank Tim Moss, IRI-THESys, for fruitful discussions resulting in this double entendre

a problem-oriented approach and paying continuous attention to the intricacies of values and power, I aim at making my research societally relevant.

How can methods be described; a methodography be written? One possibility is to present it in a “tricks of the trade”-style (Becker 1998, Fine 1993): To describe how I noticed interesting events in the field by looking for epistemic, ontological and value-based “generative frictions” (Niewöhner 2016) in headnotes, in documents, on Twitter etc. Special methodographic attention is given to (ethical) dilemmas of insider research, questions of validity, as well as questions of power when “studying up” (including feminist perspectives on this (Ross 2015), and how triangulation can alleviate, but not remove, the ethical dilemmas. Triangulation can take place by contrasting the narratives from the field with theories and current societal developments. Field work and theoretical frameworks combined lead to key analytical frameworks:

Foucault-inspired, understandings, Boyer 2019, Koopman 2019, Hasberg 2019)⁴

Uniting co-laboration and phronetic social science can help foster societally relevant, productive and reflexive research that can change the world towards more sustainable paths both socially and environmentally in our age of climate change and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2018). While ‘the reflexive turn’ in some disciplines is decades ago, others are just “coming of age” with respect to emancipating themselves from positivist-tainted notions of objectivity, scientific fact and “physics envy” (Flyvbjerg 2001, Torgersen 2018, Kollek 2019). Hence, methodography as a form of reflexivity can be of productive use not only inside, but also outside Science and Technology Studies, as an answer to the increasingly vocal calls for transparency and accountability without reentering the positivistic cage in an age of post-truth (Fuller 2017, Sismondo 2017).

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⁴ Note to self: new materialism (Star 1999, Stirling 2014, Bues & Gailing 2016); infrastructuring as a verb (Niewöhner)

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